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**Beyond the Visual Reality of Starvation:  
A Survey of the Emerging Debate on the  
Ethiopian Famine of 1984-1986.**

by

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**BEYOND THE VISUAL REALITY OF STARVATION: A SURVEY OF THE  
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**Introduction**

Memories of the Ethiopian famine may have receded in the minds of all who watched millions of starving Ethiopians on television screens between 1984 and 1986. Nevertheless, the famine and starvation that created those pitiful scenes of human need in Ethiopia of that period still engage the attention of scholars and analysts. The emerging literature on the Ethiopian famine reflects the controversy between those who blame the Mengistu government for intentionally causing the famine, as a means of countering insurgency, and those who attribute it to natural circumstances, or are ambivalent in their conclusions. The divergent perspectives brought to the analyses of the Ethiopian famine have provided an opportunity to separate explanations that reflect sympathy for the human condition in Ethiopia of 1984-86 from discussions that probe the "hard-headed objectivity" of the Ethiopian crisis.<sup>1</sup> In this process it has become possible to assess the extent of government responsibility for the famine and the degree to which it could be attributed to natural circumstances or the unintended consequences of social, political and economic processes.

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\* I thank Professors Frank Chalk and Kurt Jonassohn of the Departments of History and Sociology of Concordia University for the suggestions made and editorial assistance offered for the improvement of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Varnis, Reluctant Aid Or Aiding the Reluctant?: U.S. Aid Policy and Ethiopian Relief (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 1990), 4.



### Drought And Food Production

Peter Niggli, Robert Kaplan, Stephen Varnis, Jason Clay and Bonnie Holcomb have examined the Ethiopian famine of 1984-1986 in some detail. Their arguments suggest that the famine resulted primarily from the disruptive economic policies of the Mengistu government as well as its intentional use of starvation as a weapon of war in insurgent regions and against political opponents. These arguments are contested by Frederick Cuny, Graham Hancock, Peter Gill, Michael Barton and Lawrence Pezzullo. They assert to the contrary that the Ethiopian famine was precipitated by war and drought and aggravated by the erratic response of Western governments to Ethiopia's requests for food aid.

Writers who have given primacy to natural factors as causes of the Ethiopian famine have contended that the Ethiopian crisis formed part of the crippling problem of "drought and desertification" that affected Sahelian and sub-Saharan Africa in the early 1980s.<sup>2</sup> These writers maintain that many years of "poor rains and inadequate harvests", resulting from adverse climatic conditions, endangered Ethiopia's self-sufficiency in food production.<sup>3</sup> Frederick Cuny, an American disaster relief specialist and chairman of the Dallas-based disaster management consulting firm, INTERTECT, is a leading exponent of this school of thought. Cuny, and Graham Hancock, consider famine in Ethiopia as a perennial problem that can scarcely be attributed to "disruptive economic policies of the Ethiopian government"

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<sup>2</sup> See Graham Hancock, Ethiopia: The Challenge of Hunger (London : Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1985), 12, 74., Michael S. Barton, "Ethiopian Refugees: Resettlement and Repatriation in the Horn," Africa Report vol.29, No.1 (Jan.-Feb. 1984): 20-22., Lawrence A. Pezzullo, "Catholic Relief Services in Ethiopia: A Case Study," in Bruce Nichols and Gil Loescher, The Moral Nation: Humanitarianism and U.S. Foreign Policy Today (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989): 218., Angela Penrose, "Before and After," in Kurt Jansson, Michael Harris, and Angela Penrose, The Ethiopian Famine, Rev. and Updated ed., (London: Zed Books Ltd., 1990): 85, 134.

<sup>3</sup> See Angela Penrose, in The Ethiopian Famine, 134., Kurt Jansson, "The Emergency Operation: An Inside View" in Kurt Jansson et. al., The Ethiopian Famine, 78., Andreas Uhlig, "Hunger and Erosion: Africa's Vicious Cycle," Swiss Review of World Affairs, vol. xxiv, no.7 (Oct., 1984) : 13-14., Frederick C. Cuny, "Politics and Famine Relief," in Bruce Nichols and Gil Loescher, The Moral Nation, 278-9.



as writers like Jason Clay, Robert Kaplan, and Peter Niggli have claimed.<sup>4</sup> Cuny particularly observes that the rate of desertification and drought in Ethiopia's major food producing areas has been "incredible" since the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> In his opinion, it was primarily this crippling natural crisis, exacerbated by protracted civil conflict, that created the tragic incidence of hunger and starvation in Ethiopia between 1984 and 1986. In spite of his illuminating perspectives on the Ethiopian famine, Frederick Cuny as a disaster management consultant is likely to hold views that need to be taken with caution. Like Frederick Cuny, Graham Hancock regards the Ethiopian famine of 1984-86 as an extension of the 1972-74 famine of the Haille Sellassie period and not as a unique and separate phenomenon as Jason Clay, Robert Kaplan, Stephen Varnis, and Peter Niggli contend.

Ethiopia's civil war is widely regarded as a fundamental cause of the famine of 1984-1986 in all the emerging literature on the famine. Although the war is acknowledged as a principal cause of food shortages, its effect on the distribution of available food in Ethiopia of the Mengistu period continues to arouse debate. It is a widely held view that severe food shortages resulted from destruction of food crops and food distribution networks through military action. However, a substantial body of the emerging literature on the famine attributes starvation conditions in Ethiopia between 1984 and 1986 to what Kurt Jonassohn has described as the use of hunger and famines as "low technology weapons in conflictual situations".<sup>6</sup>

An assessment of Ethiopia's agricultural potential indicates that it is "far more

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<sup>4</sup> See Frederick Cuny, in The Moral Nation, 280 and also Graham Hancock, Ethiopia: The Challenge of Hunger, 74.

<sup>5</sup> Cuny, in The Moral Nation, 279.

<sup>6</sup> Kurt Jonassohn, "Hunger as a Low Technology Weapon: with Special Reference to Genocide." Montreal Institute for Genocide Studies Occasional Papers, (July, 1991): 4. Kurt Jonassohn is Professor of Sociology at Concordia University in Montreal in Quebec and co-author of **The History and Sociology of Genocide: Analyses and Case Studies**. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

favourably endowed" than many countries in Africa for agricultural development.<sup>7</sup> With favourable climatic conditions and rich soils, Ethiopia has the capacity for self-sustained growth and higher potential to produce large surpluses of food for export.<sup>8</sup> Though it is difficult to obtain reliable data for any accurate assessment of agricultural productivity in Ethiopia of the Mengistu period, it is highly probable that the Mengistu government's land reforms of 1975 held hopes for increased food production. By 1982, and for the first time in the history of Ethiopia, individual peasants controlled 94% of the cultivable land.<sup>9</sup> Although collectivization methods and unfavourable pricing policies of the Mengistu government (**Dergue**) discouraged initiative and productivity, a more recent Human Rights report on Ethiopia suggests that between 1980 and 1983 the Ethiopian Agricultural Marketing Corporation (AMC) held surplus food stocks in its granaries. According to this report, available rainfall statistics and records of food production levels in Ethiopia before 1984 refute the argument that crop failure and food shortages caused the famine.<sup>10</sup> This report suggests that the principal causes of the famine of 1984-1986 lie in bad agricultural policies and the maldistribution of food in Ethiopia. The object of the Ethiopian government's agricultural and food distribution policies form the main subject of the Ethiopian famine debate and the basis of the emerging view that the famine was state-induced and intended for political gain. The problem of establishing a clear case of intent for the Ethiopian famine has polarized the debate on the subject and aroused controversy over the "intentional starvation thesis".

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Henze, "Behind the Ethiopian Famine: Anatomy of a Revolution." Part 1. Encounter, Vol. 67, No.1 (June 1986): 15.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Henze, "Behind the Ethiopian Famine: Anatomy of a Revolution", Part III. Encounter Vol. 67, No.3 (Sept.-Oct. 1986) : 25

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., : 24.

<sup>10</sup> Alex de Wal, Evil Days: 30 Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia (New York:Human Rights Watch, 1991), 156.



### Intentional Starvation

The availability of food in Ethiopia and its scarcity in places where it was most needed is attributed to the distribution of food according to political allegiance. According to the Human Rights Watch report, government intentional restrictions on access to food became a powerful "counter-insurgency strategy" in the Ethiopian civil war and constituted the "single most important reason" for the famine.<sup>11</sup> The decision of the Dergue to seek a military solution to the Ethiopian civil conflict has been considered by Jason Clay, Alex de Wal, Stephen Varnis and Michael Bazyler as an avoidable mistake. In the opinion of these writers who blame the famine on central and local government incompetence and the "disastrous policies" of the Ethiopian government, the choice of a military showdown over rapprochement with political opponents makes the resulting famine in Ethiopia more a "man-made crisis" than "nature's leveller".<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, the "natural disaster" argument for the Ethiopian famine is undergoing serious revision. Dawit Wolde Giorgis, an official of the Mengistu government who defected, has maintained that it is a mistake to view the Ethiopian famine of 1984-86 as principally a natural disaster.<sup>13</sup> Wolde Giorgis, and Robert Kaplan have provided penetrating surveys of the non-natural factors of the famine. Like Alex de Wal's Human Rights Watch report, Evil Days: 30 Years of War and Famine in Ethiopia, Kaplan, and Wolde Giorgis see the acute famine and starvation in Ethiopia in 1984 as "a manipulated consequence of war and

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*, 133.

<sup>12</sup> See Michael J. Bazyler, "Re-Examining the Doctrine of Humanitarian Intervention in Light of the Atrocities in Kampuchea and Ethiopia," Stanford Journal of International Law 23, 2 (Summer, 1987), 557., Jason W. Clay, "Ethiopian Famine and the Relief Agencies" in Bruce Nichols and Gil Loescher, The Moral Nation, 232., Alex de Wal, Evil Days, 138., Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues (ICHI), Famine: A Man-Made Disaster? (New York:Vintage Books, 1985), 63.

<sup>13</sup> Dawit Wolde Giorgis, Red Tears: War, Famine and Revolution in Ethiopia (Trenton, New Jersey: The Red Sea Press Inc., 1989), 265.

ethnic strife".<sup>14</sup> Like Frederick Cuny's, the views of Richard Kaplan, Wolde Giorgis and Alex de Wal on the Ethiopian famine must be viewed with scepticism. As a journalist, Richard Kaplan has the tendency to engage in hyperbolic sensationalism in his assessment of the famine which could overlook the complex factors involved in the Ethiopian case. Similarly, Wolde Giorgis as a defected official of the Mengistu government is more likely to admit to a deliberate policy or mismanagement in his writings on the famine either to absolve himself of guilt or blame the tragedy on his cohorts. In the same vein, a Human Rights organization can distort the intricate factors involved in the Ethiopian famine in the process of documenting incidence of human rights abuses or finding plausible explanations for human rights violations.

Graham Hancock and Peter Woodward provide a contrary view of the Ethiopian crisis in separate publications from the perspective of Ethiopia's recent history. Their analyses place growing U.S.-Soviet involvement and rivalry in the Horn of Africa at the centre of the civil conflicts that created or intensified famine situations in the region. In their view, the strategic significance of Ethiopia in the Horn of Africa turned the country into a hotbed of international political intrigue after the second world war. Superpower militarization of the Horn has since intensified domestic conflicts and destroyed resources for food security in Ethiopia and other countries in the region.<sup>15</sup>

Stephen Varnis, however, disagrees with such a view. In the considered opinion of Varnis, and, indeed, Robert Kaplan, the internal points of responsibility for the Ethiopian famine far outweigh any external factors.<sup>16</sup> Contrary to the views of Frederick Cuny, Graham Hancock and Peter Woodward, Alex de Wal, Stephen Varnis, and Robert Kaplan blame the recurrence of famine in Ethiopia on "the manner in which wars were conducted"

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<sup>14</sup> Robert D. Kaplan, Surrender or Starve: The Wars Behind the Famine (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1988), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Woodward, "Political Factors Contributing to the Generation of Refugees in the Horn of Africa," International Relations vol.ix, no.2 (Nov. 1987): 112.

<sup>16</sup> See Kaplan, Surrender or Starve, 6, and Varnis, Reluctant Aid Or Aiding the Reluctant?, 7.



rather than persistent drought and superpower rivalry in the Horn of Africa.<sup>17</sup> In its 1991 report on the war and famine in Ethiopia, the Africa Watch Human Rights Organization argued that "the counter-insurgency strategy of the Ethiopian army was the single most important reason why the drought of 1983-84 became not a "normal" period of hardship but a famine of a severity and extent unparalleled for a century".<sup>18</sup> A comparison of the Ethiopian situation to that of the Kenyan drought of 1984 provides a sharp contrast to the degree of commitment of the Mengistu government to respond to a national crisis. Though unlike Ethiopia there was no civil war in Kenya, the "timely response" of the Moi government to the Kenyan drought prevented the situation from developing into famine of the kind that occurred in Ethiopia. Through a systematic food monitoring programme by district agricultural officers and the Kenyan Central Bureau of Statistics, and a well-coordinated assessment of the drought by the Ministries of Agriculture, Finance and Economic Planning, and the Office of the President, the Kenyan government took decisive steps at national and local levels to mitigate the effects of drought. Besides the massive commercial imports of food, the Kenyan government offered good prices for agricultural products to stimulate production and reduced government control of the grain market. Village famine relief committees were also established to distribute free food to drought-stricken areas.<sup>19</sup> Paul Henze has wondered why severe famine occurred in Ethiopia and was prevented in Kenya in a situation where both countries had the same 900,000 tons food deficit and similar geographical conditions of temperate highlands and desert lowlands. Henze identifies the early recognition of the problem in Kenya and the effective government planning through inter-ministerial coordination and the distribution of food to drought-affected areas at normal prices as "the Kenyan magic" that prevented a human disaster of

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<sup>17</sup> Alex de Wal, Evil Days, 27.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, 133.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas E. Downing et. al., Coping With Drought in Kenya: National and Local Strategies. (London: Lynne Reinner Publishers, 1989) , 28-29, 50, 57, 362.



the magnitude that befell neighbouring Ethiopia from occurring in Kenya.<sup>20</sup> It is against such background that one attaches great credibility to the argument that deliberate withholding of food and bombardment of roads and markets by government and rebel forces are responsible for the Ethiopian famine.<sup>21</sup> This analysis of the Ethiopian situation suggests that the government offensive against the secessionist and nationalist aspirations of Eritrea and Tigre and the responses of the rebel movements took a toll on crops and livestock to the extent that an intense famine situation was created in Ethiopia long before the drought occurred. When it did, the situation was worsened by an untimely and disastrous government response.<sup>22</sup> Studies made by Jason Clay, Alex de Wal, Peter Niggli, and Robert Kaplan seem to establish a new interpretation that the Ethiopian famine of 1984-86 was a man-made crisis intended for political gain rather than a natural disaster of historic proportion.

#### Mismanagement and Neglect

The "intentional starvation" argument for the Ethiopian crisis of 1984-86 has its opponents in Frederick Cuny, Kurt Jansson, Peter Gill, Graham Hancock, Wolde Giorgis, among others. The point of conflict has been the difficulty in establishing a neat line of demarcation between a "deliberate policy of starvation" for political gain and "badly-implemented policies" worsened by mismanagement, incompetence and neglect, in Ethiopia. The policies of the Mengistu government and the manner in which they were implemented before and during the period of the famine have raised fundamental questions about their overall intent. The agricultural policies of the Mengistu government, particularly the low pricing of agricultural products and wilful seizure of farming implements, undoubtedly

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Henze, "Behind the Ethiopian Famine: Anatomy of a Revolution." Part II, Encounter, vol. 67, No.2 (July-August 1986): 26.

<sup>21</sup> See Kaplan, Surrender or Starve, 109, and Michael Bazyler, "Re-examining the Doctrine of Humanitarian Intervention...", 557.

<sup>22</sup> See Alex de Wal, Evil Days, 4, 133., Kaplan, Surrender or Starve, 20., Andreas Uhlig, "Hunger and Erosion: Africa's Vicious Cycle", 13-14.

offered little material incentive for increased food production.<sup>23</sup> Food requisitions by the Agricultural Marketing Corporation and the Ethiopian army, "forced labour" on state farms, military operations during planting seasons, and delays in harvesting matured grains broke morale, opened vast fields of food crops to pests, and impaired Ethiopia's food security.<sup>24</sup> Hugh and Catherine Goyder have attributed the high mortality rate in Ethiopia during the famine to the absence of "purchasing power" to procure food and the lack of "legal entitlement to food" produced by farmers.<sup>25</sup> This observation reinforces Clay and Holcomb's argument that the Ethiopian socialist experiment produced a social and economic system that induced famine and starvation and tripled mortality rates in Ethiopia. Dawit Wolde Giorgis who headed Ethiopia's Relief and Rehabilitation Commission, confirms this proposition. In his view the "broken morale of farmers through revolutionary policies" of the Mengistu government accounted for national underproduction.<sup>26</sup> Giorgis does not, however, see these as policies aimed deliberately at creating a famine situation for political advantage but rather a policy failure resulting from "mismanagement and neglect".<sup>27</sup>

### Revolutionary Policies

Debate on the role of government policy in the Ethiopian famine is a polarized one. Evidence for food shortages is assessed from the perspective of ideology. David Korn, U.S. Charge d'Affaires in Ethiopia during the famine, shares Clay and Holcomb's view that the

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<sup>23</sup> See Alex de Wal, Evil Days, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Jason W. Clay and Bonnie Holcomb, Politics and the Ethiopian Famine, 1984-1986, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Cultural Survival Inc., 1986), 247-8.

<sup>25</sup> Hugh Goyder and Catherine Goyder, "Case Studies of Famine: Ethiopia" in Donald Curtis, Michael Hubbard, and Andrew Shepherd, Preventing Famine: Policies and Prospects for Africa (New York: Routledge, 1988), 82.

<sup>26</sup> Giorgis, Red Tears, 266.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*



agricultural policies of the Mengistu government were politically motivated.<sup>28</sup> It seems apparent in Korn's and in Clay and Holcomb's assessments of the Ethiopian situation that the collectivization and pricing policies formed part of a broader centralization plan of the Mengistu government.<sup>29</sup> Stephen Varnis is even more emphatic in his view that the famine situation was created by the "Communist policies" of the Dergue.<sup>30</sup> According to him, examination of the "ideological functions" of the Dergue's agricultural policies is important in understanding the causes and severity of the Ethiopian famine. Varnis argues from the perspective of the sociology of development that "state control of food system development" is a fundamental cause of food crises in "fourth world countries".<sup>31</sup> Stephen Varnis sees the delayed response of Western donor countries to the Ethiopian famine as only a reaction to the shift of Ethiopia's allegiance in the Cold War from West to East. In the view of Varnis, the adoption of "the Soviet model of social, political and agricultural development" in Ethiopia under Mengistu created the critical situation that put millions of Ethiopians at the mercy of famine and starvation.<sup>32</sup>

The collectivization of the peasantry has been widely criticized, and frequently cited as a principal cause of stagnation in food production in Ethiopia of the Mengistu period. There is no doubt that, deprived of the required inputs for cultivation, small scale farmers, who formed the backbone of Ethiopia's agrarian economy, could hardly produce enough food to sustain themselves and the growing population. However, Varnis's argument that the shift of emphasis from "market institutions" to "state-controlled systems" and the subordination of private sector activity to state sector control in Ethiopia constituted the

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<sup>28</sup> David A. Korn, Ethiopia, the United States and the Soviet Union (London: Croom Helm, 1986), xvi.

<sup>29</sup> See Kaplan, Surrender or Starve, 123, and Clay, "Ethiopian Famine and the Relief Agencies", 238, 247-8.

<sup>30</sup> Varnis, Reluctant Aid or Aiding the Reluctant?, 8.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, 6, 11.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, 38, 38, 105.

most significant cause of the famine, is debatable.<sup>33</sup> Though a shift in Ethiopia's allegiance in the East-West conflict had grave consequences for the quick approval and shipment of Western relief aid to Ethiopia, it would require substantial data from Ethiopian sources, currently unavailable, to sustain Varnis's thesis that changes in development strategy caused the decline and stagnation in food production in Ethiopia. Identifying the priorities of the Ethiopian government and distinguishing between policies and the ways in which they were implemented in a conflictual and revolutionary situation may offer a more accurate clue to an understanding of the Ethiopian famine.

### **Misplaced Priorities and Disastrous Policies**

A critical assessment of some of the views in the emerging literature on the famine seems to suggest that all that was required to boost food production in Ethiopia were proper incentives to the peasantry and avoidance of undue interference in agriculture. It is probable that food security could hardly have been the topmost priority of the Mengistu government in the conflictual situation it found itself in 1984-1986. High defence spending in the face of hunger and starvation, and implementation of questionable "famine relief measures" at a period of conflict with insurgents are, undoubtedly, the complex paradoxes in the Ethiopian situation. This explains the divided opinion among scholars and other writers, on the degree of commitment of the Mengistu government to alleviate famine conditions in Ethiopia while prosecuting a war of attrition. Obviously, preoccupation with countering insurgency diverted attention from genuine food security policies or, perhaps, effective monitoring of government famine relief programmes. It is probable that the civil war was also exploited to implement programmes or justify the imposition of policies that gave the Mengistu government political advantage in breaking the strength of the rebel resistance. Such assessment of events in Ethiopia lends credence to the view that the famine of 1984-1986 was a by-product of adversarial politics and misguided policies. It is in this context that the "intentional starvation thesis" becomes plausible and a clear case of intent can be established.

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<sup>33</sup> See Varnis, Reluctant Aid or Aiding the Reluctant?, 35-36.



No Ethiopian government "famine relief policy" has attracted more debate and aroused such intense controversy as the resettlement and villagization policies of the Dergue. The resettlement of thousands of people from their so-called "drought-stricken homes" to other "fertile" areas is estimated to have "killed people at a faster rate than the famine" itself.<sup>34</sup> However, some writers have defended the Dergue's resettlement and villagization policies as important responses to the challenge of hunger.<sup>35</sup> Others have also considered them as an integral part of the Dergue's centralization policy.<sup>36</sup> Peter Niggli, a Swiss journalist who has done extensive research and writing on resettlement in Ethiopia under the Dergue, has argued that resettlement played a vital role in promoting the collectivization idea of the Mengistu government.<sup>37</sup> Like Stephen Varnis's, Niggli's study suggests that the collectivization of the Ethiopian peasantry was the principal cause of the famine in Ethiopia.

Admittedly, in a country split by ethnic and regional feelings, relocation of people into centralized villages and government-controlled settlements provided a convenient framework for destroying sectional allegiances and breaking regional resistance to central authority. Resettlement and villagization were intended to serve as instruments for national integration in an ethnically-polarized country.<sup>38</sup> It is probable that the famine situation provided the Ethiopian government with an opportunity to control and regulate the

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<sup>34</sup> See Alex de Wal, Evil Days, 224, and Michael Bazyler, "Re-examining the Doctrine of Humanitarian Intervention," 566-7.

<sup>35</sup> See Hancock, Ethiopia: The Challenge of Hunger, 108, 113., Cuny, "Politics and Famine Relief," 284., Jansson, "The Emergency Operation: An Inside View," 64., Peter Gill, A Year in the Death of Africa: Politics, Bureaucracy and the Famine (London: Paladin Grafton Books, 1986), 143.

<sup>36</sup> See Clay and Holcomb, Politics and the Ethiopian Famine, 33, and Peter Niggli, Ethiopia: Deportations and Forced Labour Camps, A Study on Behalf of Berliner Missionswerk, 1986, 32.

<sup>37</sup> Niggli, Ethiopia: Deportations and Forced Labour Camps, 32. See also Giorgis, Red Tears, 289.

<sup>38</sup> See Niggli, Ethiopia: Deportations and Forced Labour Camps, 33, and Giorgis, Red Tears, 289.

movement of the population through the resettlement and villagization exercises.<sup>39</sup> Jason Clay and Bonnie Holcomb have asserted that resettlement sites and centralized villages also provided a pool of cheap labour for communal farms and served as centres for political indoctrination.

Dawit Wolde Giorgis has confirmed that resettlement had a manifold purpose. It served to secure political, social and economic goals. In the view of Giorgis, the deliberate settlement of loyalists along sensitive parts of Ethiopia's borders provided the Dergue with a reliable mechanism for monitoring rebel incursions or reporting perceived cases of military assistance to rebels and political opponents from neighbouring countries. Besides promoting "integration of various tribes and nationalities", resettlement provided an outlet for the removal of the unemployed from urban centres. Equally important, resettlement sites served as "rehabilitation centres" for dissenters. Above all, the scheme was used to "depopulate rebel areas" as a way of depriving the rebel movements of mass support.<sup>40</sup> Giorgis's arguments seem to suggest that the developmental objectives behind resettlement were sacrificed for political gain. According to him the resettlement scheme fulfilled the Dergue's "callous political objectives".<sup>41</sup> It also became the government's solution to its "social and national security problems". It led to "heartless separation of families" and resulted in widespread human rights abuses closer to genocide.<sup>42</sup> In the words of Giorgis, resettlement became "the Ethiopian Siberia".<sup>43</sup>

Most scholars and writers on the Ethiopian famine agree with Giorgis's evaluation of the resettlement and villagization policies of the Dergue. Indeed, the speed, methods applied and the absence of logistical support in the resettlement exercise cast serious doubt

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<sup>39</sup> See Bazyler, "Re-examining the Doctrine of Humanitarian Intervention," 560, and Niggli, Ethiopia: Deportations and Forced Labour Camps, 33.

<sup>40</sup> See Giorgis, Red Tears, 289.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 281.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 297, 301.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 286



on the relief objective of the entire programme. The scheme's political goals are discernible from evidence on the criteria of recruitment, manner of resettlement and conditions in the new settlements.<sup>44</sup> Niggli, and Clay and Holcomb have established through interviews of Ethiopian refugees in eastern Sudan that many of the settlers were settled in the Oromo heartlands in the South and South-West. Forcible relocation of people from the North to the southern parts of Ethiopia suggests a deliberate assimilation and colonization drive aimed at containing nationalist feelings in the South, particularly among the Oromo, while thinning the northern population from which the rebel Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) and Tigrean Peoples Liberation Front (TPLF) drew their support.<sup>45</sup> As Hailu Lemna has observed, resettlement in Ethiopia of the 1980s was "a cunning way of weakening aspirations of oppressed nationalities".<sup>46</sup> It has been similarly observed by Robert Kaplan that the criteria for resettlement had more to do with the potential of a peasant to assist anti-government rebellion than his or her need for fertile land.<sup>47</sup>

Critics of the Dergue's resettlement policy conclude that the entire drive was far from being a genuine response to the famine. They argue that the Ethiopian government manipulated international humanitarian aid for the pursuit of this planned counter-insurgency programme. The provision of aid without establishing the root causes of the Ethiopian crisis, in the view of Jason Clay, made the donor community indirect collaborators in the Ethiopian government policies that induced the famine.<sup>48</sup> According to Clay, and Peter Niggli, food aid and other relief supplies were increasingly used by the Ethiopian

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<sup>44</sup> See Clay and Holcomb, Politics and the Ethiopian Famine, 33, 170, 172, and Peter Niggli, Ethiopia: Deportations and Forced Labour Camps, 2, 8, 9.

<sup>45</sup> See Paul Kelemen, "The Politics of Famine," New Society vol.74, no.1194 (Nov. 1985): 282, and Clay, "Ethiopian Famine and the Relief Agencies," : 252, 256.

<sup>46</sup> Hailu Lemna, "The Politics of Famine in Ethiopia," Review of African Political Economy, no.33 (August 1985): 53, 282.

<sup>47</sup> Kaplan, Surrender or Starve, 120.

<sup>48</sup> Clay, "Ethiopian Famine and the Relief Agencies," :267.

government as bait to resettle, collectivize and conscript.<sup>49</sup>

### International Response

Frederick Cuny, Peter Gill, Graham Hancock, Michael Barton, Jack Shepherd, Lawrence Pezzullo, and Kurt Jansson are less critical of the Ethiopian government and ambivalent in their consideration of its policies as principal factors of the famine crisis. They are similarly sceptical of the arguments provided by Clay, Kaplan, Niggli, Varnis and others and criticize instead the politicization of food aid by Western governments, the inefficiencies within the international aid system and antipathy of Western governments towards the Mengistu regime. Cuny particularly considers the argument that the Ethiopian government exploited foreign aid for its famine-inducement policies as a "doubtful proposition".<sup>50</sup> According to Cuny, serious international relief operations began in Ethiopia when the famine had been adequately controlled by the resettlement and villagization measures of the Mengistu government. Cuny, and Kurt Jansson, former head of U.N. relief operations in Ethiopia, agree that the Ethiopian crisis exposed the "weaknesses of the international relief system". They attribute the intensity of the Ethiopian crisis to "poor emergency management skills" and lack of "coordination" between relief agencies that operated in Ethiopia during the famine.<sup>51</sup> The Independent Commission on International Humanitarian Issues (ICHI) report of 1985 identified competition among relief agencies and the "quality of relief staff" as some of the shortcomings in relief efforts in Ethiopia in 1984-86.<sup>52</sup> It is important to state that the potential biases of Kurt Jansson, particularly the possibility that he would defend the U.N. role in relief operations in Ethiopia or be sparing in his criticism of the part played by the host government (Ethiopia) in the famine or its relief cannot be overlooked. However, in spite of its manifold shortcomings, the United Nations Office for

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<sup>49</sup> See Niggli, Ethiopia:Deportations and Forced Labour Camps, 4, 5., Clay and Holcomb, Politics and the Ethiopian Famine, 85, 86., Alex de Wal, Evil Days, 12., and Varnis, Reluctant Aid or Aiding the Reluctant?, 163-164.

<sup>50</sup> Cuny, "Politics and famine Relief," : 286.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 280, 286.

<sup>52</sup> ICHI, Famine:A Man-Made Disaster?, 13-14.



Emergency Operations in Ethiopia (UNEOE) recognized the Ethiopian relief effort as an "astonishingly successful" operation in the history of international relief.<sup>53</sup> This assessment has been supported by the U.S. Judiciary sub-Committee on Immigration report of 1986. It described the Ethiopian operation as "a remarkable success story in international relief".<sup>54</sup> In fact, the question of the success or failure of relief operations in Ethiopia is relevant only if the famine was caused by drought or some natural circumstance. If it was due to government policies or intentional starvation measures, as a substantial body of the emerging literature seem to suggest, then a change in policy, rather than the success or failure of relief aid would have been the more appropriate response to the famine.

#### **Domestic Response: Resettlement**

Kurt Jansson, head of the United Nations Office for Emergency Operations in Ethiopia, has offered one of the most incisive criticisms of the views on resettlement offered by Clay and Holcomb and the Berliner Missionswerk-sponsored research on the subject by the Swiss journalist, Peter Niggli. Kurt Jansson describes claims that resettlement intended to depopulate the northern provinces of Ethiopia for political reasons or to provide a pool of cheap labour for state farms as overstatements in view of the numbers and the people resettled.<sup>55</sup> He argues that of the two dissident provinces, Eritrea and Tigre, resettlement did not affect Eritrea at all and only 15.2% of those resettled by the Mengistu government came from Tigre, the other dissident province. According to Jansson, the fact that very few were resettled from Tigre and none from Eritrea, with the greatest numbers coming from non-dissident Wollo, makes it difficult to sustain the argument that the resettlement programme was a political drive aimed at depopulating the rebel provinces.<sup>56</sup> Though the implementation process made the entire programme a disaster in Ethiopia, Jansson believes

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<sup>53</sup> Jansson, "The Emergency Operation: An Inside View," : 74.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 77.

<sup>55</sup> Jansson argues that by January, 1986 592,994 people had been resettled by the Mengistu government. Out of this number 63% were from Wollo, 18.1% from Shoa and 15.2% from Tigre.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 64-65.

the scheme was a necessary famine relief measure. Wolde Giorgis has argued that its development necessity notwithstanding, the resettlement programme was implemented largely for political reasons. Frederick Cuny, the strongest opponent of Clay's and Giorgis's views on the Ethiopian villagization and resettlement programmes, admits that such measures have preceded collectivization in most socialist countries, as means of controlling rural populations.<sup>57</sup> However, Cuny's analysis of U.S. and EEC aloofness towards Ethiopia's resettlement programme suggests that the timing of the policy and its potential for the regimentation of the population in a budding socialist state like Ethiopia led to the perception of the scheme as a political tool.

To all intents and purposes, the failure of the Ethiopian government to draw a line between resettlement's long term necessity as a "development policy" and its short term expedience as a "political tool" made the entire scheme a disaster. The coercive approach to resettlement and the deaths and displacements that resulted from it raise credible suspicion about the scheme's overall purpose in a war-torn socialist country. The bizarre and tragic story of people fleeing from resettlement and the high environmental cost in clearing new sites for settlements and controlled villages, may have discouraged long term external support. However, it is fair, in assessing the Ethiopian approach to resettlement, to distinguish between government directives and the excesses of marauding soldiers or local party officials who implemented the policy in a repressive society. It is also important to examine the logistical challenges to such a sophisticated programme in a war-torn country. In a country where destitute rural peasants saw their crops fail and livestock die through drought and epidemics, the government's goal of resettling up to 1.5 million people appeared as a way out of the depths of starvation. Nevertheless, in the case of Ethiopia, resettlement's potential for the regimentation of the population and the removal of the support base of the rebel movements cannot be overlooked. It is therefore not unreasonable to suppose that political reasons may have been central to the Dergue's implementation of the scheme at the height of the civil war. It is also probable that the haste to fulfill government quotas made soldiers and party officials adopt more radical recruitment and

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<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*



settlement measures that defeated the developmental purpose of the programme.<sup>58</sup> Dawit Wolde Giorgis agrees that lack of resources, and conflicts between settlers and the indigenous people contributed to the failure of the resettlement exercise.<sup>59</sup> Giorgis reveals that such conflicts ruined the programme in Gambella, Illubabor, Pawe, Gojjam, Asosa and Wollega.<sup>60</sup> The attitude of the Somali government towards the resettlement of the Ethiopian Ogadeni and the attacks on resettlement sites by the Oromo Liberation Front further jeopardized the scheme.<sup>61</sup> Kurt Jansson has added that resettlement failed as a "famine relief measure" in Ethiopia because of lack of international moral and financial support for the scheme.<sup>62</sup> If Jansson and Giorgis are right that lack of resources and logistical support threatened resettlement as a famine relief measure, then the implementation of the programme at the time it was done was unnecessary and the government's planned targets unrealistic in the face of insufficient preparation. It seems apparent, therefore, that the Mengistu government never had any sufficient reason to believe that it possessed the staff, financial support and organizational experience to make the resettlement exercise work. Thus it proceeded to implement the scheme without due regard for its impact on the lives of Ethiopians. Definitely, such a flawed scheme could hardly have inspired or motivated international moral and financial support.

### Aid Diplomacy

Two interpretations of the international response to the Ethiopian famine dominate the literature and require some examination. The first argument is that Ethiopian government policies were in themselves a disincentive to aid, besides the Dergue's hostile and uncooperative attitude towards aid efforts.<sup>63</sup> As Stephen Varnis puts it, the

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<sup>58</sup> See Jansson, "The Emergency Operation: An Inside View," : 66, 173, and Giorgis, Red Tears, 304.

<sup>59</sup> See Giorgis, Red Tears, 304, 305.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 305-306.

<sup>62</sup> Jansson, "The Emergency Operation: An Inside View," : 173.

<sup>63</sup> Kaplan, Surrender or Starve, 34.

international response was not a question of reluctantly assisting Ethiopia, but a problem of assisting a reluctant government. The second argument is that because of ideological differences, the Western aid community deliberately withheld or delayed aid to induce change in Ethiopian politics favourable to the West or to make Ethiopia a symbol of failure of the Communist ideology in Africa.<sup>64</sup>

Very significant arguments flow from both explanations. Assistance for resettlement and other Ethiopian government policies was perceived as providing the Dergue with the political and economic power to pursue its war and collectivization aims.<sup>65</sup> Allegations of the trading of relief aid for arms with the Soviet Union, diversion of food aid to the Ethiopian army and the selective distribution of aid to secure political advantage in rebel areas affected the response of the United States and other Western countries to the Ethiopian crisis.<sup>66</sup> Michael Bazylar has cited a case in January 1985 when the Ethiopian government prevented distribution of blankets to a relief camp at Korem resulting in the death of hundreds of famine victims through exposure to cold weather.<sup>67</sup>

The argument that antipathy towards the Ethiopian Marxist government accounted for the slow international response to the famine is consistently asserted by writers like Jack Shepherd, Peter Gill, and Andreas Uhlig who observe a high incidence of the politicization of food aid in the Ethiopian case. Gill, and Uhlig, for instance, maintain that in spite of sufficient warnings of impending famine and repeated aid requests, assistance for Ethiopia

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<sup>64</sup> See Andreas Uhlig, "Hunger and Erosion: Africa's Vicious Cycle," : 17, Hailu Lemna, "The Politics of Famine in Ethiopia," : 57, and Jack Shepherd, "Ethiopia: The Use of Food As An Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy," Issue, vol.xiv (1985) : 4.

<sup>65</sup> Paul Kelemen, "The Politics of Famine," : 283.

<sup>66</sup> See Bazylar, "Re-Examining the Doctrine of Humanitarian Intervention...", pp. 568-569, and Andreas Uhlig, "Hunger and Erosion: Africa's Vicious Cycle," p. 17.

<sup>67</sup> Bazylar, "Re-examining the Doctrine of Humanitarian Intervention...", : 564.



came too late.<sup>68</sup> Other writers like Stephen Varnis, and David Korn argue to the contrary that the erratic international response was mainly due to logistical constraints and the Dergue's hostile and uncooperative attitude towards the relief effort.<sup>69</sup> More importantly, the Dergue's high defence spending, expensive celebrations and perpetuation of famine through revolutionary policies punctured enthusiasm for aiding Ethiopia.

Writers like Jack Shepherd, and Peter Gill who support the "international conspiracy" hypothesis for the Ethiopian crisis examine the attitude of the major donor countries, particularly the United States, towards the Ethiopian famine. They argue that the United States, for instance, used food aid to Ethiopia for political leverage. The U.S. Ambassador to Somalia (1978-1983) and former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Donald Peterson, confirms that the principal policy issue on Capitol Hill by Spring 1986 was Ethiopia's policies and close ties with the Soviet Union.<sup>70</sup> However, Peterson does not support the view that U.S. response towards the Ethiopian famine was the result of ideological enmity. He argues that uncertainty about the extent of the famine in Ethiopia hindered a proper assessment of Ethiopia's food needs and U.S. response to it. Furthermore, budgetary constraints and preoccupation with Central America affected U.S. response to the Ethiopian famine. Above all, massive human rights abuses in Ethiopia affected Washington's response at a time when human rights questions were gaining prominence in Congress as a fundamental foreign policy issue.<sup>71</sup> Stephen Varnis agrees that the United States had a poor sense of the Ethiopian situation between 1983 and 1984. Besides, competing policy interests in Washington during the famine, technical problems in assessing the needs of Ethiopia, concern about human rights violations, and suspicion of

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<sup>68</sup> See Peter Gill, A Year in the Death of Africa, 41, and Andreas Uhlig, "Hunger and Erosion: Africa's Vicious Cycle," : 20.

<sup>69</sup> Kaplan, Surrender or Starve, 34.

<sup>70</sup> See Donald Peterson, "Ethiopia Abandoned?: An American Perspective," International Affairs vol. 62, no.4 (Autumn 1986), p. 627., and Varnis, Reluctant Aid or Aiding the Reluctant?, p. 91.

<sup>71</sup> Peterson, "Ethiopia Abandoned?," : 637.

abuse of relief aid in a situation of civil conflict, dictated the U.S. response. Far more significant impediments to the entire relief process, according to Varnis, were the Dergue's reluctance to permit government trucks to cart piled up relief aid and the giving of priority to non-relief shipments (cement and military hardware) at Ethiopia's ports.<sup>72</sup>

Food distribution in Ethiopia was more a matter of conflict than cooperation. Wolde Giorgis has argued that U.S. insistence on asserting its own objectives for famine relief and monitoring its relief operations in Ethiopia met with the resistance of the Dergue. According to Giorgis many of the charges of deliberate starvation flowed from conflict over control of relief operations in Ethiopia. Given the Ethiopian government's performance in the relief effort, the U.S. demand for monitoring its relief operations in Ethiopia was understandable.

Like the 1972-74 famine, the crisis of 1984-86 had the potential of inducing political change in Ethiopia.<sup>73</sup> The use of food aid as an instrument of diplomacy or a foreign policy weapon towards Ethiopia is indisputable. The political orientation of the Mengistu government made Ethiopia a perfect target of the diplomacy of U.S. food aid.<sup>74</sup> However, the circumstances under which aid was withheld or granted need a fuller analysis than has so far been attempted. Bolstering the Marxist government in Ethiopia or subsidizing the Dergue's policies that caused or exacerbated the famine was a growing concern across political boundaries in all donor countries. Much as the famine occurred within the context of a "restructuring" of Ethiopia's external relationships, it also occurred against the background of domestic conflict. The extent to which aid furthered the war aims of the Dergue and the liberation fronts became a matter of serious concern to the international community.

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<sup>72</sup> Varnis, Reluctant Aid or Aiding the Reluctant?, 143.

<sup>73</sup> Hancock, Ethiopia: The Challenge of Hunger, 15.

<sup>74</sup> Shepherd, "Ethiopia: The Use of Food Aid as An Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy," pp. 4-5.



## Conclusion

The arguments for and against the international response to the Ethiopian famine are striking but require more evidence to sustain their effectiveness in explaining the aid policies made. Similarly, the contrasting perspectives on the Ethiopian famine, the background against which it occurred and the domestic and international responses to it suggest the need for comprehensive research to confirm the actual and clarify the speculative. Perhaps the fundamental question in the Ethiopian famine debate is whether or not it is still possible to ascertain the facts or verify the contrasting and contending perspectives on the famine from Ethiopian government sources, Western and Eastern archives and the field data of relief agencies. With the fall of the Mengistu regime and the establishment of a transitional government in Ethiopia it is more likely that the ruling Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) may release data kept by the Dergue administration. This may provide some illuminating insights into how and why the famine occurred and encourage relief organizations that operated in Ethiopia during the famine period to open their archives to researchers. Some Western diplomatic sources, especially U.S. Congressional hearings, exist to facilitate enquiry into the facts and issues of the famine. The allegation that the Dergue used food offered by the international community to pay its army has been contested by U.S. General Accounting Office reports of 1985 and European Economic Community and U.S. Congressional investigations. These enquiries have not established serious food aid abuses in Ethiopia.<sup>75</sup> Eye witness accounts particularly those of living Ethiopian government officials and U.N. relief workers who operated in Ethiopia can enrich documented data on the famine and clarify some of their inconsistencies. Kurt Jansson, head of the U.N. office of emergency relief in Ethiopia, has affirmed that the incidence of diversion of food aid in Ethiopia was very minimal in a relief operation of that magnitude. It appears, therefore, that a combination of logistical constraints and politicization of food aid best explains the international response to the

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<sup>75</sup> See Kurt Jansson, "The Emergency Operation: An Inside View," : 56-57, and Jack Shepherd, "Ethiopia: The Use of Food As An Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy," : 6.

Ethiopian famine of 1984-86. It is also significant to mention that though it had an erratic start, relief aid to Ethiopia during the famine became one of the biggest operations in the history of international relief. The nature of the Ethiopian regime, the bureaucratic processes involved in approving and delivering food aid, and the international outcry against the human condition in Ethiopia affected aid policymaking towards Ethiopia in the 1980s. Ethiopia's relations with the countries from which relief was coordinated (Somalia, Sudan, Kenya) may also have affected the pace of relief operations during the famine.

There is little doubt that the Ethiopian famine provides a good case study of politics and food system security in Africa. Whether the famine of 1984-86 was the result of a crisis in development strategy, an outcome of the politics of warfare, the product of long years of drought, a counter-insurgency strategy of the Mengistu government or the by-product of the politicization of food aid, one issue is very clear: Ethiopia became "a symbol of Africa's crisis".<sup>76</sup> Famine in Ethiopia did not happen in a vacuum. Protracted civil war, misplaced priorities, the view and role of the peasantry in national food security policies combined in varied proportions to trigger or escalate a famine of substantial magnitude.

The causes of and responses to the Ethiopian famine will continue to attract scholarly attention. Nevertheless, the emerging literature shows a clear tendency towards revisionism. Its data-base and interpretive frameworks credibly sustain the revisionist thesis that the agony of famine and starvation that was Ethiopia in the 1980s was, in large measure, the result of protracted warfare, disastrous government policies and deliberate starvation measures in insurgent regions. The Ethiopian government's response to insurgency and the disastrous implementation of its resettlement and villagization programmes created or worsened famine conditions in Ethiopia. In the final analysis, the international attitude (positive or negative) towards Ethiopia was determined by sympathy for the starving as well as the image of the Ethiopian government and the nature of its policies in Ethiopia's moment of need.

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<sup>76</sup> Shepherd, "Ethiopia: The Use of Food As An Instrument of U.S. Foreign Policy," : 4.



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